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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 000181

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ADDITION -- VOLUME II

REF: PANAMA 157 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: POLCOUNS Brian R. Naranjo. Reasons:
1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Panama City broad sheet daily La Prensa stirred the political pot with the release of its latest installment of its "Pulse of Nation" poll series on February 22. Democratic Change presidential candidate Ricardo Martinelli extended and even increased somewhat his lead as the opposition's preferred option. Meanwhile, Minister of Housing Balbina Herrera, despite her strong assertions that she does not want to run for president (now), accelerated her lead and was far and away the preferred presidential candidate for the governing Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD). Herrera's position at the top of the PRD poll contributed to a new round of speculation as to what her true political intentions were: to run for Mayor of Panama City or to run for President. Nobody was probably pondering that issue more than current Mayor Juan Carlos Navarro whom Herrera continues to pledge to support for the presidency. Most analysts concur that the PRD scenario will not be clearer until after that party's March 9 convention, and that the opposition scenario will not be clearer until there is more definition in the internal Panamenista race.

Employment Most Serious Problem

¶2. (U) Employment continued to top voters' list as the most serious problem confronting Panama, but the percentage indicating this concern has fallen steadily over the past two years: 26.6 percent in January 2008; 41.8 percent in January 2007 and 56.5 percent in January 2006. In second place, voters cited the cost of living as the most significant concern exploding over the past three years from 0.6 percent in 2006 and 7.3 percent in 2007 to 22.3 percent in 2008. Insecurity rolled in at third place with more than twice as many voters citing insecurity as the most significant problem in January 2008 (14.1 percent) over January 2007 (6.7 percent); the total in January 2006 was 2.9 percent. Juvenile violence, corruption, public transport, health, crime/drugs, and social security were also cited as major concerns, though largely unchanged over the past three years and generally under 6 percent of the population citing them as concerns.

¶3. (U) Asked to cite what should be the top three priorities

for the government that would be elected in 2009, the results were as follows:

Fighting unemployment/generating new sources of jobs: 18.9 percent
Fighting crime/ensuring greater security: 13.6 percent
High cost of living and basic basket of goods: 11.8 percent
Being sincere and honest: 8.7 percent
Healthcare and social security: 6.8 percent
Helping the public well-being and those most in need: 4.3 percent
Being a leader: 4.2 percent
Corruption: 3.8 percent
Education: 3.3 percent

Torrijos Losses Ground

¶4. (U) More prospective voters evaluated President Torrijos' performance as bad or very bad and fewer evaluated it as good or excellent.

	Oct '07	Nov '07	Dec '07	Feb '08
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Excellent	6.6	6.9	9.0	6.3
Good	48.5	50.3	49.9	45.1
Bad	30.9	27.4	27.9	33.3
Very bad	8.2	7.8	8.2	12.9
Don't Know/Answer	5.8	7.6	5.0	2.4

¶5. (U) A majority of interviewees (58.9 percent) said that a cabinet change was necessary, down from 63.5 in January 2007.

A total of 34.8 percent said no cabinet change was necessary, up from 26.4 percent in January 2007. The rest

did not know or did not respond to this question.

¶6. (U) Asked which minister or ministers needed to be changed, the following were the results:

Min of Government and Justice Daniel Delgado Diamante: 48.8 percent
Min of Health Rosario Turner: 28.7 percent
Min of Labor and Labor Development Edwin Salamin: 25.2 percent
Min of Education Belgis Castro: 22.8 percent
Min of Public Works Benjamin Colamarco: 16.1 percent
Min of Economy and Finance Hector Alexander: 8.1 percent
Dir of the National Police Rolando Mirones: 7.2 percent
Min of Housing Balbina Herrera: 5.5 percent
All other ministers (combined): 5.1 percent.

Support for Democracy

¶7. (U) Nearly two-thirds of respondents (66.5 percent) believed that democracy, though imperfect, was the best system of government. An astonishing 29.6 percent said disagreed with this statement. One-third of respondents between the ages of 18 and 29 (33.4 percent) disagreed with this statement. Generally, the Electoral Tribunal (TE) was believed to be transparent in its management of the 2009 elections securing the support of 58.4 percent of interviewees. A total of 31.1 percent of respondents indicated a lack of confidence in the TE. Overwhelming majorities agreed that presidential candidates should publish a list of their donors (87.0 percent) and that presidential candidates should make a public declaration of their personal financial assets (92.3 percent). A total of 74.4 percent of respondents said that they would vote in 2009, and older voters were more committed to voting. The poll revealed a tie between support for the government's candidates (38.7 percent) and for the opposition's candidates (37.3 percent), and 24.0 percent of respondents did not know or respond.

Agreement on Presidential Qualities

18. (U) Government and opposition supporters basically agreed on the principal quality or qualities that they would like to see in a presidential candidate. From most desired to least desired, respondents cited the following as their most sought after qualities (government; opposition): honesty/integrity (34.7 percent; 44.1 percent), leadership (32.1 percent; 21.0 percent), experience (21.4 percent; 18.9 percent), ethics (7.8 percent; 9.0 percent), and good sense (4.0 percent; 6.9 percent).

Martinelli Still the Opposition Favorite

19. (U) At 34.8 percent, Democratic Change (CD) Party President Ricardo Martinelli remains the favorite opposition choice for president. Trailing Martinelli by 21.6 points, Moral Vanguard of the Nation (VMP) Party President and former President Guillermo Endara comes in at 13.2 percent. Panamenista Party presidential nomination aspirant Alberto Vallarino was in third place at 12.3 percent, nosing out Panamenista Party President Juan Carlos Varela. Patriotic Union (UP) President and former 1st VP Guillermo "Billy" Ford and Panamenista presidential nomination contender Marco Ameglio pull up the rear at 1.3 and 0.9 percent respectively.

Balbina Governing Coalition's Favorite

10. (U) Even though she has not declared herself to be a candidate for president -- and indeed insists publicly that she only wants to run for mayor of Panama -- Minister of Housing Balbina Herrera is the preferred candidate for president of the governing coalition (primarily the governing Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), but also the Popular Party and the Liberal Party). Herrera outpaces current Panama City Mayor Juan Carlos Navarro more than two to one polling 41.3 percent to Navarro's 20.0 percent. A total of 4.3 percent voiced support for former President Ernesto "El Toro" Perez Balladares and 0.5 percent for current 1st VP and FM Samuel Lewis Navarro. Nearly one out of every three PRD respondents cited "none" (9.8 percent) or "don't know/didn't respond" (20.8).

Martinelli Still Leads "Likely Vote" Question

11. (U) Asked for whom they would vote for president, respondents gave Martinelli the lead with 26.3 percent support, up from 22.2 percent in September 2007 and from 22.7 percent in July 2007. Herrera was next at 21.6 percent, nearly doubling her support in September 2007 which was 10.3 percent. Navarro polled about half of Martinelli's support coming in at 13.3 percent, up nearly four points since September 2007 when he polled 9.4 percent. Endara, Vallarino, Varela, and Perez Balladares pull up the rear at 7.1, 5.8, 5.2, and 2.8 percent. While Endara and Perez Balladares basically held steady since the September 2007 poll, Vallarino's support rose 1.3 percent and Varela's support nearly doubled from 2.3 percent.

PMG Seen as a Problem

12. (U) A majority of prospective voters (51.3 percent) said that the election of Pedro Miguel Gonzalez (PMG) as President of the National Assembly had made "harmonic collaboration" between the executive and legislative branches more problematic. A total of 53.6 percent of respondents -- up 3.3 percent from October 2007 -- said PMG should resign. More respondents also felt that PMG should not resign up five

points from October 2007 to 33.9 percent.

Wide Majority Support Inter-Party Primaries

¶13. (U) An overwhelming majority (81.3 percent) believed that the opposition parties should hold an inter-party primary to select a sole opposition candidate.

Technical Data

¶14. (U) Panama City broad sheet daily La Prensa published its most recent installment of its "Pulse of the Nation" polling series in a special insert included in its Monday, February 25 edition. Dichter and Neira Latin Research Network conducted the poll for La Prensa conducting 1,200 face-to-face interviews in people's homes. The poll covered urban and semi-rural areas, but excluded the indigenous areas (comarcas) and Darien province. Pollsters interviewed only men and women over the age of 18 who are residents in Panama. The margin of error was plus or minus 2.9 percent with a level of confidence of 95 percent. The field work was conducted from Friday, February 15 through Sunday, February 17. The age distribution was as follows:

Age	Percentage
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18-29	31.2
30-39	25.5
40-49	17.8
50	25.5

In the first stage, precincts (corregimientos) and census sections were selected randomly for each socio-economic level. In the second stage, the selection of interview targets was according to random routes and at the stops along these routes one person, selected randomly for sex and age, was interviewed. A total of 49.5 percent of interviewees were female, and 50.5 percent were male. A total of 69 percent of interviewees lived in urban areas, and 31 percent lived in rural areas. A total of 67 percent expressed no political affiliation while 33 percent provided their political affiliation.

Comment

¶15. (C) There were not a lot of surprises in this poll. Martinelli continues to dominate the opposition, dwarfing Vallarino and Varela, the Panamenista Party's two most viable presidential contenders. Panamenista contacts pointed with glee, however, to the overwhelming support for the inter-party primary, something Martinelli -- who characterizes the proposal as the "inter-planetary primary" and Endara continue to vehemently oppose. Meanwhile, Varela and Vallarino claim to be beating the other two to one in the internal Panamenista race for the presidential nomination. Obviously, either Varela or Vallarino has to be wrong. The problem is neither one seems to be doing any internal polling, and both appear to be operating blind. This national poll suggests Vallarino has the edge, but Varela still controls the party machinery and Vallarino's national strength could obscure his weight inside the party. The lack of clarity inside Panamenismo is stalling opposition coalition formation. Movement of Liberal Republican Nationalists (MOLIRENA) President Sergio Gonzalez-Ruiz told POLCOUNS February 27 that, though he wanted to form a coalition with Martinelli, he could not bring along his party as long as it was not clear would head the Panamenista ticket. Ditto for Ford who would like to steer UP into coalition with the Panamenista Party but who prefers Vallarino over Varela. As for Endara, if he gets left on the sidelines for opposition coalition building, he will be dead politically. Meanwhile, growing support for Herrera and one

out of three PRD members refusing to indicate a preference for presidential candidate suggest a lack of enthusiasm for Navarro and indicate that the party is somewhat adrift. The PRD scenario will not become clear, however, until after the party's March 9 convention.

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